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Original Communication

Matricides in South Australia – A 20-year retrospective review

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Abstract

A 20-year retrospective review of files at Forensic Science SA, Adelaide, Australia was undertaken for cases of matricide occurring between the years 1985 and 2004. A total of 11 cases were identified: 10 males and 1 female. The victims were aged between 42 and 83 years (mean = 61 years) and the perpetrators were aged between 15 and 53 years (mean = 28.7 years). In all 11 cases weapons such as blunt objects ($N = 5$), knives ($N = 5$), firearms ($N = 3$), or ligatures ($N = 1$) were involved in the assaults, with injuries inflicted by the weapons causing death in 10 cases. In five cases trauma was caused by more than one injurious agent/action; e.g. there was evidence of immersion and burning in two cases. In four cases there were multiple (>10) significant injuries inflicted by perpetrators suffering from schizophrenia ($N = 2$), ‘mental impairment’ ($N = 1$) and a ‘combination of psychiatric disorders’ ($N = 1$). One perpetrator committed suicide after killing his mother. Six of the ten surviving perpetrators were found not guilty of murder on the grounds of mental illness or impairment, and one perpetrator had the charge reduced from murder to manslaughter due to underlying mental conditions that included previous brain injury. Matricides are uncommon forms of homicide that have similar features in most communities studied. Intra-familial tensions with underlying psychiatric illness in the perpetrator are common findings.

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1. Introduction

Matricide is defined as the killing of a mother by a son or daughter, and is one of the rarest of reported homicides with rates varying between 1% and 4% of all murders.^{1,2} Historically this type of crime has been recognised for centuries with episodes in Greek, Babylonian and Egyptian mythology. The occurrence in mythology led to an early investigator terming it the ‘Orestes complex’ after Orestes who killed his mother Clytemnestra, having lost his father Agamemnon.¹ Reported series of matricides are uncommon and there have been a number of assertions made about characteristic features based on quite small study cohorts. We have reviewed the Forensic Science SA

(FSSA) experience with matricides over the past 20 years to determine the characteristic features of this subgroup of homicides in our population and to compare this to study results elsewhere. We have also included one case where an adopted son killed his mother.

2. Materials and methods

The autopsy files of FSSA Adelaide, Australia, were searched for matricides over a 20-year period from January 1985 to December 2004. Case files and autopsy reports were reviewed. In addition, police reports, court transcripts and coronial data were evaluated. The age and sex of the perpetrator, details of the victim, and circumstances of the crimes were summarized. FSSA provides autopsy services to the State Coroner for the State of South Australia, Australia, which has a population of approximately 1.5 million people. Over 95% of the state’s coronial autopsies are performed at the Centre.

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3. Results

A total of 11 cases were identified involving ten sons and one daughter. The victims were aged between 42 and 83 years (average = 61 years) and the perpetrators were aged between 15 and 53 years (average = 28.7 years). These results are summarized in Table 1.

In all 11 cases weapons such as blunt objects ($N = 5$), knives ($N = 5$), firearms ($N = 3$), or ligatures ($N = 1$) were involved in the assaults, with injuries inflicted by the weapons causing death in nine cases. In five cases trauma was caused by more than one injurious agent/action; e.g. there was evidence of immersion and burning in two cases.^{2,4} These results are summarized in Table 2. In four cases^{3,5,6,10} there were multiple (>10) significant injuries inflicted with the perpetrators suffering from schizophrenia ($N = 2$), mental impairment ($N = 1$) and a ‘combination of psychiatric disorders’ ($N = 1$).

4. Case details

Case 1: The body of a 56-year-old woman was found lying face down in the kitchen of her home under the body of her husband. At autopsy a single shotgun wound was

found of the right side of the neck with death attributed to haemorrhage and cervical spinal cord injury. Her husband had died of a shotgun wound to the head. Their 27-year-old son who had committed the crimes was found not guilty on the grounds of insanity and detained in a secure psychiatric institution until further order of the court.

Case 2: The body of a 48-year-old woman was found partially concealed in a sleeping bag in a lane. At autopsy there were two lacerations of the scalp not associated with skull fracture; bruising of the neck, with facial and conjunctival petechiae and a fracture of the hyoid bone; and frothy oedema fluid in the lungs and airways. Death was due to manual strangulation. The perpetrator was the victim’s 16-year-old son who had battered his mother around the head, held her head in a bath containing water and then strangled her. There was no history of mental illness. The son was sentenced to life imprisonment for murder with a non-parole period fixed at 10 years.

Case 3: The body of a 78-year-old woman was found on the floor in the main bedroom of her unit. The head had been severely traumatized with fragments of skull and brain tissue scattered around the room. At autopsy the cranial vault, face and upper cervical vertebrae were shattered with the only remaining bony tissue being a portion of the occiput and the right half of the mandible. The brain was absent. There were also multiple incised wounds of the neck with incomplete decapitation, the head being attached to the chest by a thin strip of skin at the back of the neck. There were also at least eight separate stab wounds not associated with haemorrhage or bruising behind the right ear. Death was due to massive blunt force trauma to the head possibly from a large rock that was adjacent to the body at scene. The incised wounds with incomplete decapitation may have been inflicted after death. The perpetrator was the victim’s 39-year-old son, who lived with his mother and who had suffered from chronic paranoid schizophrenia for more than 10 years. He was found to be not guilty of the charge of murder of his mother on the grounds of insanity and detained in a secure psychiatric institution until further order of the court.

Case 4: The burnt bodies of a 47-year-old woman and her 59-year-old defacto husband were found on the floor of a bedroom in their house that had been damaged by a recent fire. At autopsy there were at least six lacerations to the female victim’s head with compound comminuted skull fractures and lacerations and contusions of the brain. Eighty-five percent of the body was charred with exposure of underlying bone. Soot in the airways and a blood carboxyhaemoglobin level of 16% indicated that the victim had been alive at the time of fire. Death was attributed to cranial trauma due to multiple blows with a blunt object, with inhalation of products of combustion. The cause of death in the de facto husband was haemoaspiration complicating comminuted skull fractures. The perpetrator was the woman’s 19-year-old son who was convicted of murder. The son had no history of mental illness and did not live at home.

Table 1
Age and sex of victims and perpetrators in a series of 11 matricides occurring in South Australia over a 20-year period from 1985 to 2004

Case	Age of victim	Age of offender	Gender of offender
1	56	27	Male
2	48	16	Male
3	78	39	Male
4	47	19	Male
5	74	35	Male
6	69	33	Male
7	42	15	Male
8	83	53	Male
9	49	22	Male
10	51	24	Male
11	74	33	Female

Table 2
Presence of mental illness, type of weapon and number of injuries in a series of 11 matricides occurring in South Australia over a 20-year period from 1985 to 2004

Case	Psychiatric disorder	Weapon/method	Number of significant injuries
1	Yes	Shotgun	1
2	No	Strangulation/immersion/blunt object	3
3	Yes	Blunt object and knife	Multiple
4	No	Blunt object and fire	6
5	Yes	Knife	19
6	Yes	Knife	12
7	Yes	Rifle	2
8	Yes	Handgun	1
9	Yes	Blunt object and knife	6
10	Yes	Blunt object/strangulation	>10
11	Yes	Knife	1

Case 5: The body of a 74-year-old woman was found on the floor in her house with nine stab wounds to her head and ten stab wounds in her back. There was a fracture of the mid thoracic vertebrae due to hyper-extension of the back. Death was attributed to stab wounds of the chest that had involved the left pulmonary artery. The perpetrator was the victim's 35-year-old adopted son who had a complicated past medical history that included Klinefelter syndrome, birth-related brain damage and brain injury necessitating the insertion of a shunt following a motor vehicle accident. He had been incarcerated in a psychiatric institution in his adolescence and was prone to outbursts of rage. The son was sentenced to 12 years imprisonment for manslaughter with a non-parole period fixed at 10 years.

Case 6: The body of a 69-year-old woman was found on the floor in her house. There was a lethal deeply incised wound of the anterior neck that had extended through the larynx, jugular veins, carotid arteries and intervertebral disc between cervical vertebrae 5 and 6, with exposure of the spinal cord. In addition, there were 10 separate adjacent incised wounds of the anterior neck, an incised wound over the occiput, numerous defence type wounds of the hands and scattered bruises of the hand, head and chest. The perpetrator was the victim's 33-year-old son who had suffered from paranoid schizophrenia for 13 years. He had a history of aggressive behaviour and repeated violence towards his parents, and had previously threatened to kill them. He was found not guilty of the charge of murder of his mother on the grounds of insanity.

Case 7: The body of a 42-year-old woman was found on the floor of her son's bedroom. There were two lethal 0.22 calibre gunshot wounds to the head. The perpetrator was the victim's 15-year-old son who was living at the home address. His mother was described as having been very dominating. Psychiatric assessment revealed that the son suffered from a major depressive illness with previous suicidal ideation. He was found not guilty of the charge of murder of his mother on the grounds of insanity and referred for psychiatric treatment.

Case 8: The body of an 83-year-old woman who suffered from depression and schizophrenia was found in her bed with a lethal 0.38 calibre gunshot wound to the head. No other injuries were present. The perpetrator was the victim's 53-year-old son who had also suffered from a long history of depression and who had committed suicide after the matricide (with the same weapon). The perpetrator's wife had left him some months before the crime and he had been living with his mother for a short period.

Case 9: The body of a 49-year-old Oriental woman was found buried in a quarry near the body of her 68-year-old mother. The 49-year-old victim had three lacerations of the head with bruising associated with extensive anterior craniofacial fractures. There were also three stab/incised wounds of the neck with incision of the left internal carotid artery. Death was due to a combination of blunt craniofacial trauma and stab wounds to the neck. Her mother had died from stab wounds to the neck. The perpetrator was

the 22-year-old son who despite a history of schizophrenia and illegal drug use was deemed to be mentally competent at the time of the crimes. He was found guilty of the murders of his mother and grandmother and sentenced to life imprisonment with an 18-year non-parole period.

Case 10: The body of a 51-year-old Oriental woman was found lying on the floor of the kitchen at her home address surrounded by a pool of blood. A leather belt was around the neck and there were numerous lacerations and bruises of the head (>10), without skull fracture, and with bruising of the chest. Death was attributed to strangulation and blunt force trauma to head and chest. The perpetrator was the victim's 24-year-old son who was found not guilty of the charge of murder of his mother on the grounds of mental impairment and referred for psychiatric treatment.

Case 11: The decomposed body of a 74-year-old woman was found partially buried by her daughter in a creek bed. At autopsy a single lethal stab wound to the chest transecting the left brachiocephalic vein was found. The victim's 33-year-old daughter was found not guilty of the charge of murder of her mother on the grounds of mental impairment.

5. Discussion

Matricides are an uncommon event often developing out of abnormal family situations with a history of significant mental illness. Psychiatric disturbances have been reported in perpetrators and were present in nine of our cases (82%) including three with long standing schizophrenia and two with depression. Although matricide was once considered to be most often associated with schizophrenia, having been reported in 94% of perpetrators, a wide variety of mental illnesses have been reported including depression, schizoaffective and personality disorders, with others exhibiting signs of substance abuse or the effects of previous head injury.^{1,3,4} In other series the rate of schizophrenia has been much lower at 6%.² Whether this represents a true difference, or is merely a reflection of different diagnostic practices, or is an artefact of small study numbers is not certain. Six of the ten surviving perpetrators in our series were found not guilty of murder on the grounds of mental illness or impairment, and one perpetrator had the charge reduced from murder to manslaughter due to underlying mental conditions that included previous brain injury.

Numerous psychodynamic theories have been advanced to explain this behaviour that most often occurs in situations where there is a dominant mother with an immature dependent son and either no, or a passive, father.^{1,5} In our series there were significantly more sons than daughters (10:1), a feature noted in other reports.¹ A classification system has been suggested with three separate subtypes: Type (1) involving a juvenile offender who is not suffering from a psychiatric illness, but who comes from a markedly dysfunctional family; Type (2) involving an older perpetrator with chronic mental illness rendering him very

dependent on his mother. In this circumstance the environment is not abusive but the perpetrator may be psychotic at the time of the homicide; and Type (3) where the family is abusive with a domineering mother, passive father and a psychotic perpetrator.⁵ Examples of these categories were present in the reported cases.

Schizophrenic perpetrators are often responding to paranoid delusional systems involving their mothers and tend to use quite violent methods such as bashing or repetitive stabbing. Certainly the four cases in the current series with the most number of wounds included two sons with paranoid schizophrenia and one with a complicated mental history that included brain injury, outbursts of rage and previous institutionalisation. Schizophrenic perpetrators have contrasted with those suffering from depression who have tended to use less violent methods such as asphyxiation and who have shown remorse after the act.¹ Suicide of the victim's son who suffered depression may be an example of this in case 8, although matricide-suicide is a very uncommonly reported event.¹

It has been proposed that the most susceptible group to matricide are young, single, socially isolated schizophrenics living with their domineering, disabled or frail mothers.^{3,5} The relationships have been described as 'mutually dependent but hostile'.⁶ While there appears to seldom be a sexual motivation to the crime, occasional cases have been reported where mother-son incest has precipitated the event.⁷ Increasing intra-familial tensions are considered to trigger a 'catastrophic crisis' with tragic results.⁸ In some psychotic offenders with hypochondriacal delusions there may be an altruistic motive to the killings with a belief that this will relieve the victims of their suffering from perceived illness or disease.⁶ This phenomenon has also been described in murder-suicides, particularly where mothers kill their children, or where elderly individuals kill a chronically ill spouse.^{9,10} While a racial predilection to matricide has been reported, with studies showing much lower rates among Hispanic, Oriental and Indian groups,⁵ our small series had two Oriental women (18%).

Matricides are often committed in the bedroom or kitchen of the house of the victim¹ and in eight of our 11 cases the body was found at the home address, three in the bedroom of the victim and two in the kitchen. In two of the three cases where the bodies of the victims had been left outside only very rudimentary attempts had been made to conceal the corpses. Green also found that the mother was the only victim in 84.5% of cases,¹ and this matched our series where in eight cases (73%) the mother was the only victim. In the remaining three cases the father, the grandmother and mother's partner were also victims.

Matricides usually involve the use of a weapon, with stabbings and bashings being the most common methods employed.^{2,11} Although some series have shown lower rates of firearm usage in matricides compared to parricides, this is not always so,¹² and the type of weapon used may be influenced by availability.¹⁰ In our series there were three deaths due to guns, five bashings and five cases involving stabbing, with injuries due to more than one weapon or action in five cases. In some cases there is an element of 'overkill' with quite extreme violence; for example Green reports a case where there were 177 stab wounds.¹ This is most often found in Holcomb's third type of matricide⁵ and was illustrated by case 3 where the victim's head had been effectively destroyed by repeated crushing with a rock.

This study confirms that matricide is a rare form of homicide often incited by abnormal family dynamics or mental illness in the perpetrator. Sons are more often perpetrators than daughters and there may be considerable violence involving more than one weapon or method of injury, particularly if the son suffers from paranoid schizophrenia. Despite considerable variation in methods and characteristics of homicide among different communities the typical features of matricides appear relatively uniform.

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